



# TEEN DATING VIOLENCE AND DIGITAL ABUSE: RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

IN TODAY'S WORLD, TEENAGERS' DAILY activities and social worlds often revolve around cell phones, texting and instant messaging, watching and creating online videos, and social networking sites. While so many of these great technological innovations are positive, there can be risks for teenagers – risks like digital dating abuse.

Digital dating abuse is perpetrated when a teenager uses technology like texting and social networking to bully, harass, stalk or intimidate a boyfriend or girlfriend. The most common digital abusive tactics involve utilizing technology to harass a partner's friends, tamper with a partner's social networking account, stalk a partner, embarrass a partner or send degrading messages to a partner.

In addition to these abusive ploys, a very troubling tactic involves pressuring boyfriends or girlfriends to send text messages with sexually explicit photographs of themselves. This practice, which is known as sexting, is illegal when it involves teenage minors and can lead to criminal prosecution or the confiscation of communication devices by law enforcement. Under Texas law, teenagers whose cell phones contain pictures of nude or semi-nude minors can be prosecuted for their conduct.

Harassment and abuse in the digital world may not be the only ways an abuser inflicts harm on a boyfriend or girlfriend. According to a recent survey

of middle and high school students, most individuals who are victims of digital abuse are also victims of physical violence or psychological abuse from their partners. About 84 percent of teenagers who suffer from digital dating abuse at the hands of their boyfriend or girlfriend also endure psychological abuse by their partners, while half are abused physically and one-third experience sexual coercion.

To help raise awareness about teen dating violence and digital dating abuse, the Texas Attorney General's Office is joining with law enforcement professionals and crime victim advocates across the country this February to observe National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month. In addition to educating teens about the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships, this joint outreach and public awareness effort will work to help adults and teens recognize when a friend or loved one is a victim of abuse.

Texas peace officers serve on the front lines of the State's battle against domestic abuse and have a critical role to play in protecting abuse victims from dating or domestic violence. But law enforcement cannot identify every victim on their own, so it's crucial that the public stay vigilant and learn the signs of abuse so that they can help identify victims and end the cycle of abuse. That's why this year's teen dating

violence awareness week is designed to supplement law enforcement efforts by teaching the public how to identify the signs of abuse.

Both law enforcement and the public should be aware that a teenager may be suffering from digital dating abuse if their boyfriend or girlfriend:

- Dictates or controls who the individual interacts with on social networking sites;
- Sends negative, insulting or even threatening emails, tweets or other online messages;
- Uses social networking sites and text messaging to constantly monitor the individual's activities;
- Sends unwanted, explicit pictures or video – or pressures the individual to send sexually explicit content of their own;
- Demands access to the individual's online passwords;
- Frequently examines the individual's mobile device to monitor their digital photos, texts and call logs

Members of the law enforcement community and the general public who wish to obtain additional information about how to recognize and respond to teen dating violence and digital abuse should consult the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline's website, [www.loveisrespect.org](http://www.loveisrespect.org).

Anyone who believes a young Texan is suffering from an abusive dating relationship should encourage the

victim to speak to a trusted friend or an adult about the situation. Concerned Texans can also encourage teenagers who have witnessed or experienced potential dating violence to call the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline at (866) 331-9474. The helpline offers real-time, one-on-one support 24 hours a day. Through the helpline, trained volunteers guide teenagers on how to recognize unhealthy behavior and leave abusive relationships.

Parental involvement can be a powerful tool that prevents teen dating violence. By talking with their teenage children and staying aware of developments in their child's life, parents can show that they care and are approachable when problems arise. Setting boundaries and simultaneously entrusting kids to conduct themselves responsibly may feel like a balancing act, but it can really help protect teens from harmful relationships.

All Texans have the right to live violence-free lives in a safe and healthy relationship – both in-person and online. The Texas Attorney General's Office is committed to working with law enforcement, victim groups and others to ensure that Texas teenagers have access to the resources they need to end dangerous or harmful relationships.

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